

BEFORE summer, nearly 1,500 National Guard soldiers had helped federal officers control access to the United States along the Mexican and Canadian borders.

One such place is Laredo, Texas, where up to 20,000 vehicles and 100,000 people cross four bridges into the United States daily. It's one of the busiest border points in the world, said the area port director for the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

"The Guard soldiers arrived just before one of our peak periods, spring break, which was followed immediately by Holy Week, when a lot of people cross this border. Getting those guys at that time was like having the cavalry come over the hill," said Ramon Juarez, the INS chief for the San Antonio district.

After weeks of waiting for the green light from officials in Washington, D.C., the National Guard had taken on its newest six-month mission in homeland defense. The 1,500 unarmed troops, primarily from the Army Guard, began assisting INS and U.S. Customs Service officials in eight states along the Canadian border, and in the four states along the Mexican border.

Maine, Vermont, New York, Michigan, North Dakota and Washington Guard aviators also began conducting surveillance flights along the Canadian border.

The Texas Guard mobilized 184 soldiers to work with the INS and 200 to work with Customs Service personnel at 20 points of entry along the winding, 800-mile border between New Mexico and the Gulf of Mexico.

Fifty-one Guard troops in Laredo helped reinforce an INS crew of 150 officers, to keep traffic flowing smoothly and avert any potential trouble.

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ON THE BORDER

Another 49 are working with some 300 Customs inspectors at two bridges that clear as many as 6,500 trailer trucks hauling cargo north every workday, said Customs Chief Inspector Benito Juarez. Between 4,000 and 5,000 come across the new World Trade Bridge built to accommodate the increased traffic generated since 1994 by the North American Free Trade Agreement, he said.

The National Guard troops brought relief to border officers who began working 12- to 16-hour shifts during a time of high alert, after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11.

The soldiers are now helping foreign citizens fill out arrival forms, and are inspecting car trunks for drugs, explosives and other contraband. They're helping to examine every

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piece of luggage unloaded from lines of buses.

They're also helping to X-ray the thousands of trailer trucks, and their contents, coming from north and south of the borders every day.



SFC Jorge Garcia and U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service inspector Melissa Mercado inspect a vehicle at the Laredo, Texas, port of entry.



**Story and Photos by
MSG Bob Haskell**

“Anti-terrorism and counterdrug operations go hand in hand,” said Juarez, “because these people can hide bomb-making material and drugs in the same compartments.”

The increased scrutiny has led to the seizure of 50 percent more illegal drugs this year, compared to last year, Customs officials report.

It’s a personal matter for Texas Air Guard Master Sgt. Samuel Ponce, who has worked counterdrug operations with the USCS for 10 years.

A narcotics trafficker, who was high on drugs, murdered Ponce’s younger brother, Carlos, in August 2000, Ponce said.

“Having troops in the right place at the right time to intercept this stuff is very important to me,” said Ponce, who supervises the 15 Guard troops

assigned to the World Trade Bridge.

Most people coming into this country are law-abiding people, said Juarez. The challenge is to find the potential troublemakers without upsetting the innocent, and to keep border traffic and commerce flowing.

“We want to let people know that we may have become more vigilant, but it’s still business as usual,” he added.

The Guard’s six-month border mission, expected to continue through September, reinforces customs and immigration services’ roles in protecting America against terrorism until those services can hire and train more full-time employees, officials said.

As an example of the INS’ workload alone, it issued nearly 70,000 permits to foreign nationals crossing into Laredo over one eight-day period, Juarez said.

What used to be a 20-minute delay before Sept. 11 became a four-hour crawl toward the U.S. border until the Guard arrived, he indicated.

Some of the Guard troops, including Ponce and Texas Army Guard SFC Jorge Garcia, have already gained experience by working U.S. Customs counterdrug operations that have been going on for about 10 years.

Garcia worked that detail near El Paso for five years before being reassigned to INS duty in Laredo.

He’s seen marijuana wrapped and taped in plastic and stuffed into gas tanks that hold just enough gasoline to get a vehicle across the border, he said. Others simply set the bags of marijuana under the hood of their vehicle.

“It’s amazing how they find other places to hide the contraband after they’ve been caught,” said Garcia, who no longer looks only for drugs. “Now we’re looking for everything.”

That’s what the Guard soldiers are finding. The stuff includes contraband cheese loaded into car trunks, and 18 grams of marijuana rolled into five cigars that were hidden in a speaker panel.

A customs inspector’s dog sniffed out that stash, said SPCs Michael Young and Angel Siller, who removed the cigars.

The visible presence of the Guard soldiers is having the desired effect, Juarez said.

“Everyone was sensitive about militarizing the border,” he said. “But when people drive across the border, they see these soldiers in their camouflage uniforms. Then they think that if the military is involved, this country must mean business.” □



SPC Oscar Mendez answers a Mexican citizen’s question about the INS form that foreign visitors must complete before entering the United States.